

My Hidden Trout Treasure

While hunting grouse in a remote Lincoln County forest, I came upon a beaver pond that looked like it might hold a few small fish. Was I ever surprised.

By Ben Long. Illustration by Ed Jenne.

I found this particular beaver pond without the help of guidebooks, gossip, or Instagram. Instead, I heard about it from a duck.

I lose things all the time and rarely find them again. And when I occasionally find someone else's lost item, it's almost never as nice as the things I've misplaced. For example, I have left all sorts of quality pocketknives across North America. I've found a few pocketknives, too, but as a rule they are so rusty as to be useless.

The beaver pond is the exception. Here I found something

both utterly unexpected and beyond expectations.

People have been tramping across central North America for thousands of years, so any "discoveries" made by explorers in recent centuries have always been partly self-delusional. Even Lewis and Clark were informed about the Great Falls of the Missouri by the Mandan Indians months before viewing the distant mist rise above the prairie. But knowing it was there beforehand didn't lessen the thrill of seeing the massive 900-foot-wide waterfall, what Lewis called "the grandest sight I ever beheld." They also looked for and found trout below the falls, adding a new species to the record of western science: the westslope cutthroat.

Two centuries of non-Indigenous people settling, mapping, and exploring what we now call Montana have made it even less likely for anyone to stumble upon something undiscovered.

These days, exact spots along a stream where anglers pose for maximum clicks on Instagram are geotagged for all to find. So the beaver pond is like my own miniature Great Falls. But unlike the Corps of Discovery, I never saw it coming.



The setting is the Stillwater River drainage in northwestern Montana. None of the standard Montana clichés apply: no cowboys, miners, or Hollywood refugees; no bison or bison hunters. Here Montana's Big Sky is squeezed out by towering spruce, fir, and larch.

There are few roads, and the villages of Trego and Olney are little more than built-up railroad sidings. The distant rumble of trains joins the birdsong. The land is not especially mountainous, but it is rugged. Here's where railroad crews built the longest tunnel in Montana, drilling and blasting seven miles through solid bedrock.

Aboveground, the boreal forest reminds me of how Thoreau described Maine: "all mossy and moosey." The muddy logging roads are pocked with moose tracks, along with those of white-tailed deer and wolves, and, occasionally, lynx and snowshoe hares. It's also a good spot to hunt ruffed

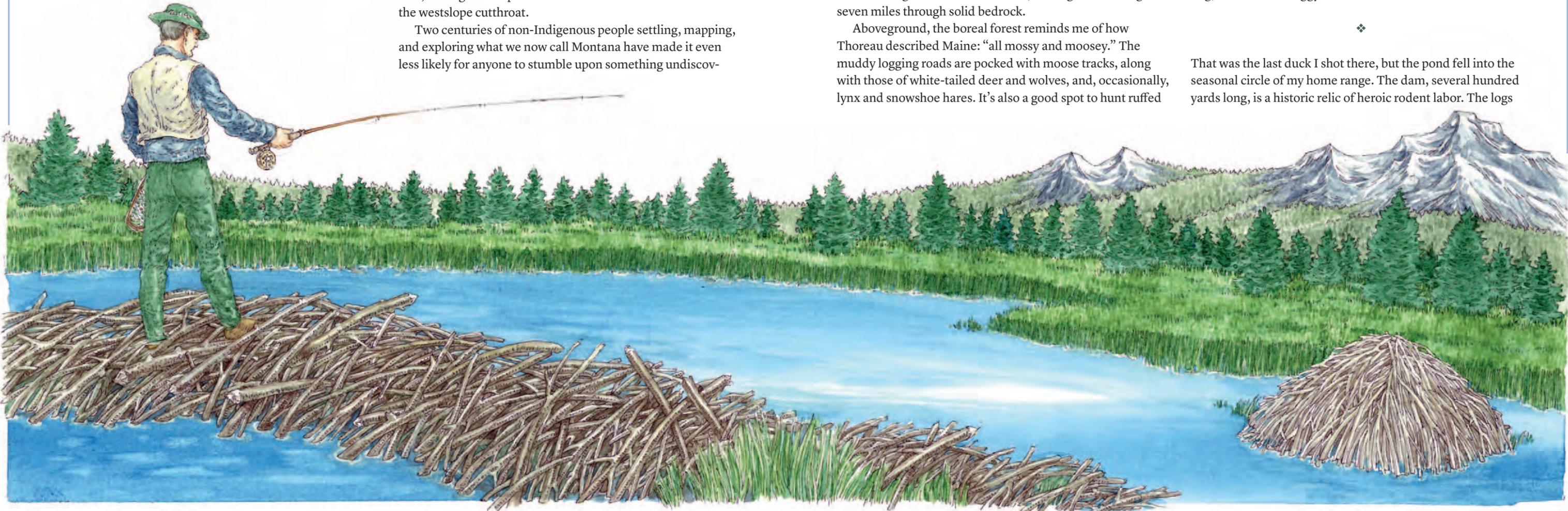
grouse or spruce (Franklin's) grouse. I take my 12-gauge or .22 there each September to pot a few for dinner.

When I was still in my 20s, more than three decades ago, I hunted for grouse along a closed logging road until I reached a burbling forest stream. There I heard the unmistakable gabbling of feeding mallards. The sound seemed utterly out of place beside a mountain stream, until I realized that it must have been plugged by beavers to create ponds somewhere behind the curtain of alder and spruce.

I had a few steel shot shells in my vest, so I set all my lead shells on the ground—lead can't be in your possession when using requisite nontoxic shot for waterfowl—slipped the loads into the magazine, and stalked upstream through the woods. Shortly, I emerged into a marshy meadow that I had no idea existed. A small flock of mallards erupted. I fired at the front bird and the third in line fell with a splash. Because I had no dog, it made for a soggy retrieve. But I was tickled all the same.



That was the last duck I shot there, but the pond fell into the seasonal circle of my home range. The dam, several hundred yards long, is a historic relic of heroic rodent labor. The logs



are white and dry, like the bones of some prehistoric giant emerging from the muck and willows. It struggles to impound perhaps five acres of open water, although the surrounding meadow suggests it was once several times that size before sediment gradually filled in the edges. The meadow grass around the pond covers goop that you'd sink into over your head. The waving strands are lovely to look at but better appreciated from a distance.

I have found the tracks of otters, beavers, mink, and bears along the pond's edges, but never those of another person.

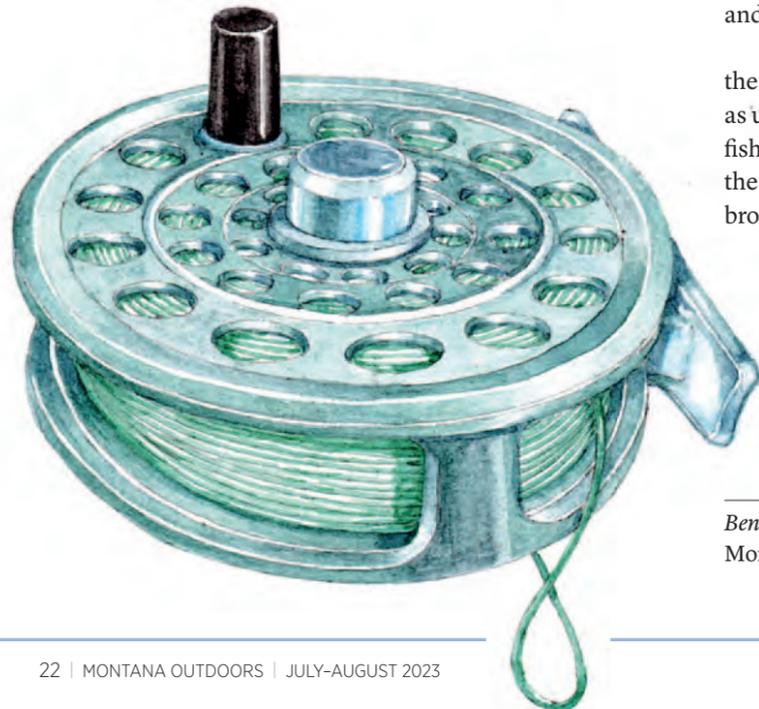
During September grouse seasons, I'd eat lunch on the edge of the pond and fantasize about the Kootenai Tribe moose hunters or Hudson Bay Company trappers who preceded me.

I also asked questions. Not big ones, like, "What's the meaning of life?" or "Where did we all come from?" I'm content with smaller queries, like, "I wonder if there are any fish in this pond?"

These days, when every fraction of the globe is pixelated by satellite and digitized in "The Cloud," is there hidden someplace a treasure box of surprise? And, if so, can a 5-weight fly rod pry open the lid?



Come to think of it, my fly rod itself represents another discovery. One sweltering hot summer evening, when the sky was



doomsday gray from forest fire smoke, my wife Karen and I went to a favorite swimming hole, on the main stem of the Stillwater River not far from the beaver pond. As we walked back to the car after our dip, I checked a huckleberry bush to see how the fruit was budding. One branch seemed oddly straight.

I plucked the branch from the brush and found it was a fly rod that had been lost some years before. The cork handle had been chewed by mice and the line was decayed. But the rod was still flexible and the reel said "Sage." Once home, I gave the reel a shower of WD-40, added new line and backing, replaced the tip eye, and acquired a foundling rod.

Just the thing to test foundling waters.

Like a field scientist, I again pondered my question: Would the beaver pond support fish? A trout would be nice, but any fish would do. My expectations were low. The pond was, after all, a small, warm, silted-in body of water. If it did have fish, I suspected they were mere fingerling brookies.

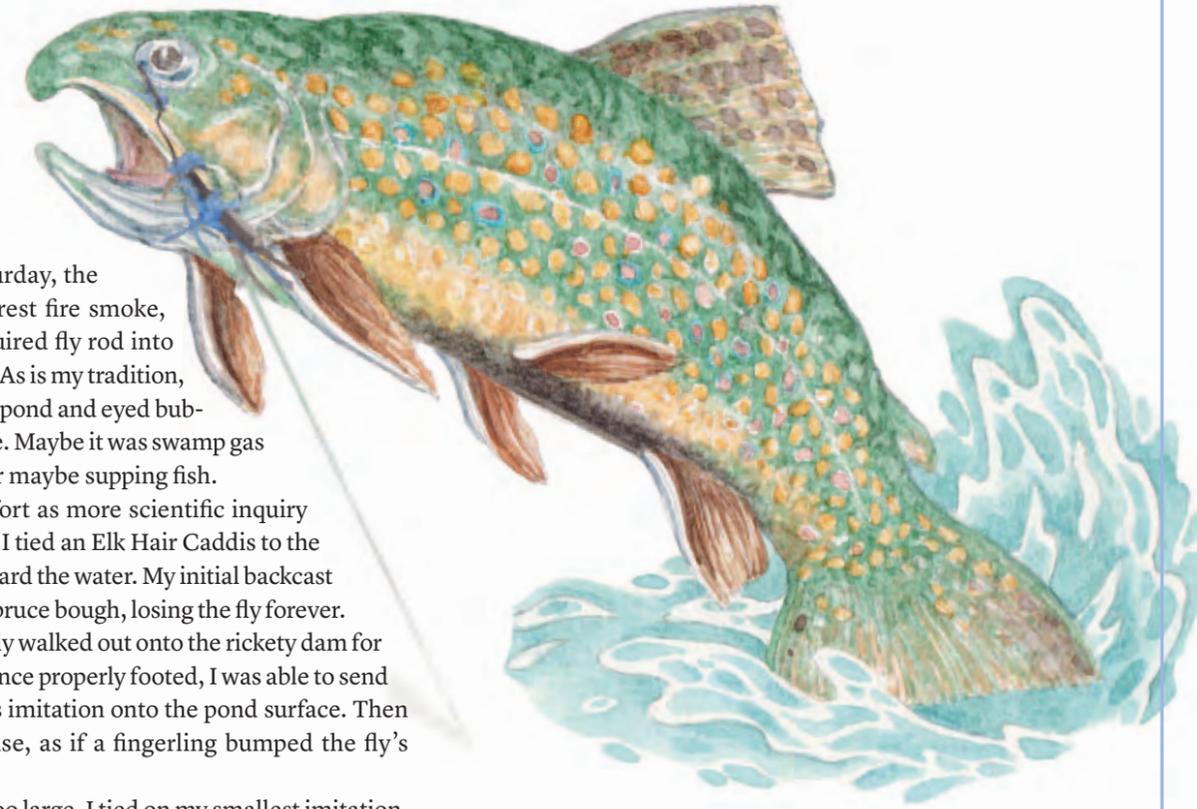


When Lewis and Clark "discovered" the cutthroat trout at Great Falls, they immediately compared them to the fish they knew back home: brook trout. Brookies arrived in northwestern Montana less than a century after the Corps of Discovery and even predate what's now known as Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. Folks on the railroads carried little brook trout in milk jugs of cold water from back East, where the species is native, and dumped them merrily as they passed any body of water.

Some Montana anglers love brookies, claiming they are the best-eating trout of all. But many others malign the species as unwelcome carpetbaggers. They consider them low-rung fish, well below the native cutthroats and bull trout and lacking the glamour of Missouri River rainbows or Madison River browns (both also non-natives).

In part, the low reputation of brook trout comes from the fact that, in so many Montana waters, they become overcrowded and stunted. You can catch them, sure, but they tend to be all head and tail, with skin and bones in between. Kid stuff. But back in their home waters of New England, catching brook trout on a dry fly from a beaver pond is considered sophisticated sport.

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One September Saturday, the sky again hazy with forest fire smoke, I tucked my newly acquired fly rod into my grouse-hunting bag. As is my tradition, I ate my sandwich at the pond and eyed bubbles on the water surface. Maybe it was swamp gas escaping the bottom. Or maybe supping fish.

I now viewed my effort as more scientific inquiry than sporting endeavor. I tied an Elk Hair Caddis to the 4X tippet and edged toward the water. My initial backcast lodged in an overhead spruce bough, losing the fly forever.

Undaunted, I carefully walked out onto the rickety dam for a clearer place to cast. Once properly footed, I was able to send a newly attached caddis imitation onto the pond surface. Then I saw the most timid rise, as if a fingerling bumped the fly's hackle with its nose.

Perhaps the fly was too large. I tied on my smallest imitation, a dry fly the size of a mosquito. It floated lightly before a small splash indicated a take, and the line suddenly went taut.

Eureka! My scientific hunch was right. I brought in and released a 4-inch brook trout. Already I was delighted. But the bite was not over.

As is my tradition, I ate my sandwich and eyed bubbles on the surface. Maybe it was swamp gas escaping the bottom. Or maybe supping fish.

A few casts later, another trout took the fly and raced off, taking line from my reel as it headed to the pond bottom. At first I thought the leader was wrapped around a submerged snag. But eventually I was able to bring to my feet a trout twice the size of my earlier catch. A few more casts produced several additional 8- to 10-inchers, and I realized I had underestimated this pond's potential.

I revised my inquiry to: "What would happen if I tossed a hopper imitation out there?" I tied on a purple Chubby Chernobyl and cast it out onto the pond. Upon landing, it detonated an instant explosion. The attacking trout catapulted skyward. I recall seeing the perfect silhouette of the fish against the pond surface.

My motion to set the hook was entirely unnecessary because,

in its zeal, the trout had fully hooked itself. I pulled in line until I could maneuver the powerful trout onto the dam at my feet. I was awed.

The brook trout was fat, with shoulders. But most remarkable was that it was as colorful as a bird in breeding plumage, almost psychedelic. It was as if God had melted a box of crayons and molded a perfectly proportioned trout with the wax. I'd read of male brook trout in their spawning splendor but had never seen one firsthand.



I spent three hours wrestling in brookies like that, filling a plastic freezer bag with trout for a fish fry but releasing most unharmed to face the otters I assumed lived nearby. That's another joy of brook trout: In Montana, populations tend to suffer from underfishing, which causes stunting due to too many fish and not enough food. So brookie creel limits here are often generous.

I hiked home giddy, not just from the fishing itself but from the surprise of it, the joy of discovery, of having a hunch exceed my wildest expectations.

Don't expect to see my beaver pond geotagged or featured on Facebook. It's not that I'm too stingy to share. I just wouldn't want to deprive anyone else of an opportunity to make their own discovery. 🐟